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‘Going Underground’: A Tube Worker’s Experience of Struggles Over the Frontier of Control

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Abstract

Mainstream media representation of London Underground (LU) workers typically foregrounds their alleged militancy, greed and negligence towards the travelling public. This knee-jerk tendency obscures the voices, expressions and experiences of workers themselves. This article enriches public sociology by giving Stephen, a Tube driver and former LU station worker, a platform to share his vivid story. Stephen’s voice reveals deep sociological insights into the realities of workplace struggles over the shifting ‘frontier of control’ at LU, and graphically captures uneven and fluid patterns of individual/collective resistance to restructuring and ‘modernization’. His lived experiences of managerial control and worker autonomy, interfacing with different degrees of alienation, new technology and customer engagement, have changed over time as ‘passengers’ become ‘customers’ and ‘give and take’ employment relations dwindle.

Key Words:

Disputes, frontier of control, London Underground, modernization, resistance, unions

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Why Stephen's 'unscripted' voice is important

Dominant neoliberal 'customer service' and 'modernization' discourses have sparked debates around intensified managerial control regimes in service organizations (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013; Laaser, 2016). State-owned London Underground (LU) (or Tube) can carry 5 million passengers daily and employs around 17,000 people. LU and its trade unions: the National Union for Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), the Associated Society of Locomotive Steam Enginemen and Firemen (ASLEF), the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) and Unite the Union, have contested modernization and restructuring in successive disputes, (see Darlington and Dobson, 2015 for overview of LU industrial disputes). When disputes occur, much of the British media is often critical of LU workers and their unions. For example, an Evening Standard headline reads 'Furious commuters slam travel 'mayhem' after London Underground walkout' (Bullen, 2017). Manning (2001) elucidates how 'media incorporation' processes restrict employee/union media access during disputes. Journalists trim and simplify employee/union accounts, masking complex details of why conflict materializes.

There is further scope for sociological research on workplace struggles like at LU, which critically challenges prevailing orthodoxy. Darlington's (2009, 2012; Connolly and Darlington, 2012) valuable body of work on left-wing union representatives and strike mobilization at LU, remains a rare exemplar. Our article deepens connections between OTFL

and public sociology (Brook and Darlington, 2013), by publishing a LU driver and former station worker's (Stephen) testimony of his real life experiences into public spheres where skewed mainstream media commentary of LU workers is often unchallenged. Stephen is not a union representative or activist, but his voice deserves to be heard unfiltered.

The shifting 'frontier of control'

Few day-to-day working patterns are stipulated solely through formal employment contracts. Implicit contracts are informally negotiated between employers and employees, shaped by perceptions of whether reciprocal expectations over effort-reward bargain issues are met, or violated (Baldamus, 1961). As Stephen's narrative illuminates, employment relationship implicitness foments a fluid and incomplete 'frontier of control' (Goodrich, 1920) between worker autonomy and managerial control. Frontier positioning is always contestable and reflects relative power relations, filtered through interactions between multi-dimensional and contradictory internal/external contextual forces (Batstone, 1988).

Crucially, employers and employees engage in relations of structured antagonism (Edwards, 1986). Manager concerns to 'control workers' and employee concerns for 'workplace autonomy' are dialectically opposed, but whether frontier of control struggles escalate to observable conflict hinges on contextual conditions, such as the specific organization of managerial control regimes. Although the capitalist labour process contains a 'control imperative', management control regimes at work can be more variable and subtle than direct control (Dundon and Dobbins, 2015; Edwards, 1986; Friedman, 1977; Hyman, 1987; Thompson and Van den Broeck, 2010). Reflecting Friedman's (1977) important distinction between managerial preferences for direct control versus responsible autonomy, Stephen affirms that an efficient Tube network requires managers to harness employee cooperation through conceding somewhat greater worker autonomy, albeit, never full autonomy. Equally,

LU workers do not deliberately aim to reject all forms of capitalist authority and engage in 'crippling resistance', as mainstream media often suggests. Stephen strongly supports informal 'give and take' relations with management, but feels such relations have diluted in recent years.

At LU, unions mediate worker power and control. Employees (and their unions) possess disruptive and political power, resources which Batstone (1988) affirms can contribute to shifting the frontier towards greater worker control over effort-reward bargain issues. Collectively-orchestrated resistance threatens political legitimacy by disrupting LU services. Yet, worker/union resistance pivot on multi-faceted internal/external contextual factors. For instance, Stephen possesses more power as a driver than he did as a station assistant because of his role at the point of service delivery.

Union identities, 'what unions are', embody fundamental 'root structures' shaping strategy and inter-union relations (Hodder and Edwards, 2015). On stations, Stephen deemed TSSA a 'minority supervisor union' and joined RMT because of its 'all-grades' identity. On trains, ASLEF's 'specialized drivers' union' orientation conflicts with RMT's 'all grades' identity, triggering rivalry and nourishing managerial control. However, workers engage with union identities in multi-dimensional ways. For example, although Stephen prefers RMT's 'all grades' orientation, he changed unions after an ASLEF representative helped him secure additional time off. Workers also switch unions during disputes to avoid striking.

Stephen has experienced different forms and degrees of control at LU, shaped by changing jobs (from station assistant to driver), levels of alienation, engagement with 'customer service' discourse (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013; Laaser, 2016), technological change (Edwards and Ramirez, 2016), union power, managerial identities and LU funding. Stephen notes that overall, the frontier at LU has shifted towards intensified managerial control in

recent years and unions are finding it challenging to contest this. He explains that 'modernization' pushed customers centre stage and augmented managerial control on stations. Yet, recent cuts in government funding for LU's parent body, Transport for London (TFL), is undoubtedly a salient contextual force suppressing budgets and steering managerial control strategies. Government plans for a self-sufficient TFL in coming years implies turbulent times ahead.

The 'frontier of control' at LU is not a static line delineating managerial control and worker autonomy. It is fluid and is re-positioned by contextual forces. Shifting patterns of concerns exist amongst workers and managers, who all seek to 'push' the frontier in varied ways, directions, and at different times. Stephen contrasts Will, a manager encouraging 'give and take' relations, with Susan, a manager endeavouring to discipline drivers. Furthermore, rebuffing mainstream media representations of 'money-grabbing' Tube drivers, Stephen has other concerns aside from wages. For example, he seeks a 4-day working week and work-life balance because of his long work commute.

The fluctuating patterns of control and resistance sketched by Stephen's narrative illustrate the value of radical sociological scholarship. This can reveal the conflict-cooperation dynamic by embracing structure-agency analysis that embeds human actions in broader socio-economic contexts, but without making structural deterministic assumptions (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013; Dundon and Dobbins, 2015; Ram et al., 2015).

To inform public debate and gain richer sociological insights into Stephen's working realities, his experiences were abstracted from two, two-hour, semi-structured interviews (November 2016 and May 2017), in his Tube train cab. Ethnographic observation of a Tube driver at work facilitated deeper engagement with Stephen's working life and enhanced the

article's contribution to public sociology, by prompting additional interview questions and uncovering deeper, less-observable realities (Burawoy, 2013).

First stop: LU station assistant

I started on LU in 1996 and the only vacant position was 'station assistant'. I would have preferred a driver's wage, but I accepted the offer and hoped to become a driver in the future. Many drivers have come from stations because of a union agreement that LU can only recruit drivers externally if there are no suitable internal applicants.

People think that working on stations is easy, you stand by the gate line and assist passengers occasionally. It is definitely much harder than that. I was bombarded with questions from the public throughout my shift. Overall, the majority were fine, but you always have a few bad apples. I enjoyed talking to people, particularly tourists, I learnt about different cultures, but customer interaction was extremely tiring. The job is also safety critical and the network is under threat of terror attacks. I was working the day of the Underground terror attack in 2005, I will never forget the scenes I saw.

When I worked on stations everybody took pride in what they did. We were like a family of brothers and sisters. I spent my entire shift with other station staff and everybody looked out for one another. There was only 1% of my colleagues I did not get on with. I worked at two different stations and both were managed in completely different ways. At one station it was mayhem because of high foot-fall. Providing I did my job, I was left alone by supervisors and managers. There was CCTV (closed-circuit television), like in all other stations, but not as much as there is now. The other station was quieter, supervisors were on your back more. In both stations I got on with some supervisors, but not with others, there was a complete mixture of personalities.

On stations I followed a roster and opportunities to swap shifts were rare, because there were very few employees to swap with, especially in the second station I worked at. If I started at 5am, I could maybe swap with someone starting at 7am, but not always. The money was poor, I only earned around £16,000 when I first started, so I was forced to work a lot of overtime. If I had a four-day weekend, I always worked at least two of those days.

RMT

When I started working on stations, everybody told me to join a union. I had a choice between RMT or TSSA. I joined RMT, an all-grades union, because TSSA mainly represented the supervisor/managerial grade and did not have many members at the time. I was not, and I still am not, a keen union activist though. I do not attend meetings, I just pay my dues and go on strike if we are in dispute. I cannot remember a station only strike during my time there. They rarely occur because if station staff strike, trains still run. Office staff are also used to fill in for striking staff and some stations can be left open unmanned. Divides between grades also damage station staff power, all grades should help each other out, but it does not work like that, a 'them and us' feeling has been built.

I do remember shutting the LU network down during an all-grades strike over the Public Private Partnership (PPP) though. The PPP went ahead despite union resistance but it failed miserably and LU were forced to bring engineering work back in-house. The PPP did not affect my job as such, it mainly affected engineers, but I was strongly against it. After experiencing extended working hours and deteriorating working conditions when London buses were privatized, and I was a bus driver, I knew that private companies are only concerned about profits, they do not care about public service, or employees.

During my time working on stations, the job changed quite dramatically. When I first got the job, little money had been pumped into the system for 20 odd years. Then suddenly money

was poured in to 'modernize' the network. The focus shifted from 'passengers', to 'customers'. Customer service became more and more important and we had to work harder for our money. The PPP in 2002, for example, was allegedly going to deliver better value for money to customers, but that backfired.

I stayed on stations much longer than I expected. The money was far from great, but I got used to the job. After 11 years, I told myself if I do not become a driver now, I never will. Stations have become even more customer centric since I left. My role is even labelled 'customer service assistant' now.

Second stop: LU Tube driver

I prefer working on trains to stations because of the money. I do not need to work overtime and drivers are not allowed anyway because of a union agreement, but being a driver is very boring, repetitive and lonely. I miss the customer interaction on stations. Here, the shift drags on and it is only me and my train. We are not allowed to put the light in the cab on, but I would not want to see myself staring back at me for hours anyway. I ask friends and family if they want a trip in the cab sometimes to have someone to talk to. Some lines, like the 'Metropolitan', have many over ground stations, but most of this line is underground, I can be driving for hours in dark tunnels, making the job even more tiring. There is no CCTV in the driver's cab, our unions would never allow it. There is a peculiar stick in there, nobody knows its purpose and years ago there was a false rumour that it is a microphone listening to what we are saying in the cab. Some drivers started putting tape around it!

When I first became a driver I drove manually and my concentration had to be perfect. I needed to know when to break, where the corners were. I felt I was doing something important. My driving was controlled by electronic signals, telling me when I could move. If I passed a red signal, it would be classed as a 'signal passed at danger' (SPAD). If drivers get

too many SPADs we can be disciplined, moved to another line, or even dismissed. I have had one SPAD, but I was not punished because the signal had a technical fault.

The line became automatic around 2014. Some drivers on manual lines call us 'push button drivers' now. Whether you prefer automatic or manual depends on the driver. Many new drivers like automatic trains, but they do not know any different. I preferred driving manually because even though I do not need to worry about signals now, they gave me something to focus on, especially when driving through tunnels. I do not feel as needed anymore because of technology. If there was an incident though, drivers are essential. Usually when we are on strike, you hear talk of driverless trains. I would not travel without a driver, I doubt most of the public would either. Drivers get paid for what we know, not what we actually do. If a driverless train stopped in the middle of a tunnel, how would travellers know what to do? Passengers do not like uncertainty, especially underground. If my train stops at a platform, or during the journey for longer than it should, I have 40 seconds to explain on the tannoy why. If the tannoy does not work because of the incident, I can walk through the train, reassuring people.

Likewise, driverless trains cannot spot if someone is about to jump in front of the train. Unfortunately, this happens regularly, especially before and after Christmas. Luckily, it has not happened to me yet, but it is a horrible feeling knowing what I may have to face during my shift. When I enter a platform, I must assume that every person could potentially jump and look out for body language. If I notice anything suspicious, I can push the brake. Hopefully I will stop in time, as one of my friends did, if not, at least I tried to stop. Driverless trains will not stop unless they are programmed to.

I have more control over my working times as a driver because I am part of the 'mafia', formally called a 'syndicate'. One of the drivers organizes the shifts of all 'mafia' members

and creates a new roster with the shift pattern we want. For instance, I want late shifts, other members may want to work earlies or middles, depending on their individual circumstances and responsibilities. I can request particular rest days and he may, or may not be able to accommodate. I do not know until the week before the exact times of my shifts/rest days. Years ago, some drivers gave the 'mafia man' gifts to get their preferred shifts, but he takes nothing now and just says he will do the best he can. Drivers and LU benefit from this system. Without it, drivers would need to fill a form for each shift swap and shifts would need to be manually adjusted on the system. It makes scheduling much easier. Some depots do not have a mafia, maybe because nobody wants to organize the shifts, it is a tremendous amount of work. Membership is voluntary, there are only around 20 members here. I have not heard of any station with a 'mafia man' organizing shifts, but they should have one because of worker responsibilities and circumstances.

I have only worked in one depot, but like on stations, I get on with some managers, not others. I am more inclined to get on with them if they have had years of experience as drivers themselves, because they understand where we are coming from. If they come in directly from other grades, or from the LU graduate scheme, they have not experienced what we experience day-to-day. This creates difficulties when drivers try to defend their actions or explain events. Overall, most managers in this depot are ok, but I definitely feel that they were more willing to help drivers when I first became a driver. Drivers have less power now. I do realize that managers' hands are relatively tied, above them are managers telling them what to do and above them is another layer of managers. More give and take would benefit everyone though. We work on a fragile Tube network. If an incident occurs on our line, ranging from a technical fault to a person jumping in front of the train, managers need driver cooperation. Trains may be in the wrong locations for instance and our duties may need changing to get the system back running smoothly. Staff morale is at its lowest and sickness

is through the roof, making it difficult for managers to find drivers to cover duties. If you want a happy workforce who just get on with the job, work with them, not against them.

Like on stations, manager personalities play a key role. Susan [a manager] is constantly looking for a reason to discipline drivers. If she is away and another manager is taking her disciplinary interview, she ensures that they give the punishment she had planned, even if they have a different opinion on the situation. After saying that, I had been off because of a death in the family and Susan accused me of being absent on more days than my sick note covered. Fair play, Rob, another manager, stood up for me and said she was wrong. Rachel has a heart of gold, but cannot make any managerial decisions. Then we have Will, a manager who does his best to help drivers out because he knows that when he needs a favour, drivers will help him in return. I may want to change one of my rest days, but I am too late to make a request to the 'mafia man'. He helps me and then I will help him another day, everyone is happy.

Even Will is under pressure though when it comes to issues like being late. Say a driver who is never late for work, is running late one day. Before he would have been let off, but now everybody is 'booked'. He must write a 'memo' and if it happens too often, he can be disciplined. He would not be late regularly enough to be disciplined, but that misses the point. Managers fear other drivers saying, 'he is late, why haven't you booked him, you always book me?' They probably will, but now managers cannot seem to say, 'I've not booked him because he only comes in late once in a blue moon, you come in late every day.' It happened to me recently, Ashley booked me and I am never late. Not long after that, he asked me to help him out by starting my shift earlier and I refused. I would have helped him if he had not booked me a few weeks before.

They say that Tube driving is the hardest job to get on LU, but the easiest job to lose because if anything happens, the driver always gets blamed first. I was accused of following the wrong procedure during a station evacuation and was stood down, meaning I could not drive. It was not long before they found workers in other grades were to blame. Yet, often, if you are to blame, or you cause problems for management, LU seems to move you up the career ladder, or sideways. We had a driver who caused problems amongst drivers, he wanted a line transfer and suddenly he was given one.

I do not hear about 'customer service' on trains like I did on stations, I barely interact with customers at all. The only opportunity for customer interaction is when the train stops at a platform and needs to travel in the opposite direction. I then move from my cab at one end of the train, to the cab at the other end. There may be customers still on the train as I change ends. We often hear about LU wanting to increase driver productivity. It has been increased over the years by providing more frequent trains to passengers, we are in our cabs longer now. Yet, even though trains arrive at a platform every two minutes, I still get passengers unwilling to wait for the next train, jumping on too late and getting their bag stuck in the doors. Somebody had a bizarre idea once that to further increase driver productivity, we could work on different lines, one line one shift, a different line the next. That would never work, all lines are different, it takes months for a driver to be trained on another line. Switching from one line to another would mess with our heads, creating mistakes that risk passenger safety.

ASLEF

I stayed with RMT for two years, but then switched to ASLEF, who represent around 60% of drivers. Some drivers join ASLEF after leaving stations because they like the idea of a specialized union representing drivers only. For me, it was not about the union itself. I agree

with RMT's all-grades approach, but I did not feel that the RMT rep here was doing enough. It was the final straw when I requested time off because of a personal issue, the manager refused and I went to the RMT rep, but he would not challenge the decision. The ASLEF rep overheard the conversation, went to the manager and sorted the time off I needed. I joined ASLEF there and then. I had to think about the rep I deal with day-to-day. Other drivers here, or in other garages, may decide they prefer the RMT rep.

Collectively, drivers have more power than station staff because trains cannot run without us. Nor can LU replace drivers as they can with station staff. There are particular issues I would like to see ASLEF pushing for collectively; for example, a longer break, but unions have won us fantastic working conditions and pay. Disputes do not always result in strike action, concessions are also won at the negotiating table. However, we have less collective power now than we did, I have even considered leaving the union because of it. Management are more adamant to push through their plans and are less likely to back down. Rivalry between unions does not help. It varies from depot to depot, but there should only be one union, we are all doing the same job after all.

During RMT strikes, some RMT members join ASLEF to avoid striking. For example, in 2014, strikes were organized over plans to cut station staff and close ticket offices. As a former 'station assistant', I understand the importance of having adequate staffing levels and ticket offices, but drivers who did not want to lose pay for plans they perceived as not affecting their job, could switch to ASLEF. Likewise, ASLEF drivers who felt obliged not to cross any picket line could join RMT for the day to legally support others. Some drivers are dual members and therefore never need to switch, but pay two membership subscriptions. We rarely have ASLEF only strikes, but we did in 2012 over Boxing Day working. During that strike, some ASLEF members changed to RMT to avoid striking. LU wanted to make Boxing

Day working compulsory, but we won that dispute and it is now worked voluntarily, they always get enough volunteers.

If both unions strike together, the Tube network is shut down easily. This happened in 2015 because LU wanted to adjust our rosters to cover the Night Tube on Friday and Saturday nights. Even though I am part of the mafia, I was worried that I would have to work some nights, I was strongly against that. Some drivers were willing to work night shifts, but were not satisfied with the pay enhancements offered. In the end, LU hired part-time drivers externally for the Night Tube. During that dispute, we also won the guarantee to trial a 4-day week for drivers. It was trialled on the Jubilee line, but all has gone quiet about it now. I definitely want to work a 4-day week because I live 1.5 hours away. I would prefer to work longer shifts to get an extra day off. It would be voluntary, many drivers in my depot do not want it, it depends on individual circumstances.

I used to have pride in my job as a driver, I enjoyed it, but not now. Where else am I going to go though? I have no qualifications, I do not even know what a CV is. It would be difficult enough for me to get a job, let alone a job with decent pay. Many other drivers are in the same situation. The public hate us because we strike when we earn high wages. My first response to that is, newspapers create big problems by only reporting half the story. Secondly, drivers do not always strike over money, again, newspapers help feed this misconception. For example, the majority of drivers did not want the Night Tube destroying our work-life balance, regardless of any pay increase. Many drivers did not want to be forced to work Boxing Day. There are also individual line disputes over various issues only affecting that particular line. Outcomes during disputes like that largely depend on local representatives and management on that line. In a recent Piccadilly line dispute, drivers refused to drive trains because of a health and safety concern, known as ‘flat wheels’.

Thirdly, a lot of people do not see that unions win our wages and working conditions for us. In fact, London bus drivers were at one time earning higher wages than Tube drivers, but our unions fought for better pay. I think it is disgusting that I get paid more than doctors, but other professions need stronger unions. Yet, even with strong unions, we are definitely not as powerful as we were, the power has shifted towards management and there is less scope for give and take. Finally, my response to the public is, why not join us at LU? Why not apply to work on stations, assist masses of people throughout your shift, then apply for a driver position, where it is just you and your train underground? When I say that to my friends and family, they say, 'oh no, I could not do that,' could you?

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Stephen Murphy is the pseudonym of a London Underground employee. Stephen joined London Underground in 1996 as a Station Assistant and later progressed to become a Tube driver.